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RESEARCH PAPER

Abdel Rahman Munif's Cities of Salt as a Postmodern Allegorical Narrative

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ABSTRACT

The study elaborates Abdel Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989) as a postmoderrn politico-historical allegory. Fredric Jameson's premise that all third world literature is necessarily allegorical has been combined with the rhetoric of postmodernism which hypostasizes its radical break with the past through a revival of allegory. Rejection of metanarratives marks the postmodern. The denunciation is suggestive of a positive development since grand theories are constructs tending to disregard the potential of the individual event and the natural existence of disorder and chaos in the universe. Along with ignoring the heterogeneity of human existence, metanarratives become unreliable because they are produced and fortified by power structures. Hence the discussion concludes that in the milieu of the third world the personal and the political are so intertwined that the one cannot be separated from the other; and Munif's narrative working as an apparatus of allegorical enunciation is capable of not only bringing about biopolitical change but also undermining the hegemonic discourse of Eurocentrism.

KEYWORDS Allegory, Postmodern, Third World Literature

Introduction

Metanarratives, like Progress, Enlightenment, Emancipation and Marxism, had formed an integral part of modernity, while the postmodern has been particularly marked by a distrust of such narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard highlighted the increasing skepticism of the postmodern condition in the Introduction to his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in these words:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language . . . Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (Lyotard, 1993, pp. xxiv-xxv)

For poststructuralist philosophers, like Lyotard, Foucault and others, such rejection of grand narratives is suggestive of a mainly positive development because grand theories are basically constructs having a tendency to unduly disregard the potential of the individual event and the natural existence of disorder and chaos in the universe. Metanarratives not only ignore the heterogeneity of human existence, but they also become unreliable since they are produced and fortified by power structures.

Contemporary discussions of culture, art and literature are marked by an inclination to interrogate the efficacy of expression, communication, meaning and language. Questioning of such fundamental concepts of human existence and human sciences is the primary concern of postmodern discourse. When philosophical reflections

are made on the negativity of language, the figurality of language cutting across the whole process of verbal expression, the impossibility of a lucid and fixed meaning, the slithering of the signified from the signifier are not new themes; but postmodern theory, along with these major propositions, is also about a thorough discontinuation from orthodox culture, a metanarrative concerning the devaluation of long-established metanarratives of legitimation, or the collapse of the heritage of Western humanism. That is why Fredric Jameson calls postmodernism a cultural break (Jameson, 1991, p. 26). Lacan's concept of schizophrenia being "a breakdown in the signifying chain" is an exact simulacrum of the postmodern situation (as cited in Jameson, 1991, p. 26). It is a psychoanalytic-linguistic elucidation of the disruption which is characteristic of the present-day poststructuralist postmodernist cultural scenario. According to Jameson, "When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" (Jameson, 1991, p. 26). A broken connection is the common feature of a schizophrenic psyche and a disconnected signifier, and both of these become appropriate metaphors for the 'death'—the alleged vanishing—of the individual subject. In such a situation, decentered psyche is fragmented within the confines of an extremely isolating overdeveloped contemporary Western society.

Such postmodern feeling of disconnectedness exists at both social and psychological levels. This is because when links in the chain of signification are broken up, this failure of language has an effect on both the communal life and the personal life. E. Ann Kaplan views the postmodern cultural break in the same way as Kuhn's paradigms or Foucault's episteme: such moment of the postmodern break has been originated by modernism which can be seen as an intermediate phase coming between the nineteenth century Romanticism and the present cultural scene (1988, p. 1). The postmodern condition is best described by the words 'breakdown' and 'break' because it is essentially a condition of fragmentation and fundamental discontinuity in history and culture.

The rhetoric of postmodernism hypostasizes this radical break by a revival of allegory. The concept of allegory is typically described in the language of cacophony and disruption. The revival of allegory is significant as being symptomatic of the present cultural and theoretical moment. According to Fredric Jameson, allegory reveals a… generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and discontinuities, to the heterogeneous (not merely in works of art), to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions, to social differentiation rather than to Society as such and its 'totality', in which older doctrines of the monumental work and the 'concrete universal' bathed and reflected themselves. (Jameson, 1991, p. 167-168)

Traditionally allegory has been a discourse which exists neither in itself nor of itself but to reveal a loftier order of things. Such order is not directly there in the text of the allegory. In allegory there is always a deliberate acknowledgement of the fact that direct presentation is not possible. So allegory is only an indirect representation of something other than what the text literally says. In it the meaning always exists on the other margin of the signification. Between the sign and the signified a sense of gap is always there. There is a sense that an effort to uncover and decipher is continuously needed. In postmodern criticism, allegory becomes the choice trope because of such sense of discontinuities and gaps, and because of the self-aware demand for being interpreted.

One text is read through another in allegorical structure, even though their relation may be fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic. Thus palimpsest is the paradigm of allegory. Canadian literary critic, Herman Northrop Frye suggests that allegorical work has a tendency to dictate the course of its own commentary. So, allegory has a metatexual feature which is always cited when allegory is criticized as being just an interpretation, a kind of flourish or rhetorical embellishment, appended post facto to a written text. However Frye argues that "genuine allegory is a structural element in literature; it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone" (1974, p. 54).

In his article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson differentiates between First World and Third World literature. He constructs a theory of the cognitive aesthetics of Third World literature, and proposes that all Third World texts are necessarily allegorical, and should be read as national allegories because a certain nationalism is still fundamental in the Third World, which has long since been liquidated in the First World (1986, pp. 65-88). He urges the Western readers to re-examine the seemingly naive, and "socially realistic Third World novel" (1986, p. 66), because the third world cultural productions are generally approached dismissively by the Western reading public. The reason he gives for such dismissive reading is the Western readers' privileged (First Worldly) distance from politics. The national and economic stability in the First World is taken for granted, and the luxury of reading fiction is enjoyed there as a key to private, psychological status. Hence, in Jameson's view, because First World reader does not take part in the inferences of a Third World reading community, a bridge should be built between fiction and the world across which the reader must travel for a meaningful reading experience. There must be an interpretive strategy based upon a conscious relation between the political and economic suppositions underwriting the First World reader's encounter with literature.

But the problem with allegory is that it requires a fixed, target narrative in order to be legible. This should be an extra-literary text, or 'reality'. So Jameson goes beyond proposing an interpretive method. He offers an extra-literary text. A collective struggle for economic and political independence is significant in the Third World culture, which is mainly organized through the experience and expression of nationalism. Hence, all Third World novels are not only national allegories but should also be read as allegories, because they are always necessarily related to one popular concern, namely "the experience of the collectivity" (Jameson, 1986, p. 15). Taking Jameson's argument as a theoretical framework, it can be said that the difference between European postmodernism and Arab postmodernism is that the former is a form of completed modernization in which the premodern is duly liquidated, while the latter is a form of incomplete modernization where the premodern is still not adequately liquidated.

Literature Review

In 1987, when the first volume of Munif's quintet *Cities of Salt* was translated into English by Peter Theroux, it was extensively reviewed within the literary press of the United States. John Updike's response was the most prominent who reviewed *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989) for the *New Yorker* (1991, pp. 563–570). He disliked the novel for formal and political reasons. These reasons are worth-examining because of their scope for opening up broader questions about the frontiers of genre with regard to transnational frontier literatures. The first question which arises is that how the traditions of the American frontier and wilderness literature can get disturbed through America's "offshore histories" (McClintock, 2007). The second question which can be asked is that how much the novel itself is an adaptable resource to engage the multifarious and vast

history of the resource curse. The third question is that how the refraction of an oral community through the medium of the written novel is affected by the technological, geopolitical and geological translations of that oral community's vernacular landscape into the official landscape of petrocapitalism. The last question is that within the canon of environmental literature, how much can be learnt from such novels as envision America from the outside in, which simultaneously provincialize and globalize America, and thereby reconfigure America's weight in the world order.

Although Updike does not raise any of these questions, his point of view makes the productive employment of such questions possible. First of all he scoffs at the stance of the novel towards America. He argues that the narrative is imbued with a hostility indicating that "the maledictory rhetoric of the Ayatollah Khomeini is nothing new" (1991, p. 566). While he acknowledges the epic quality of the theme of oil, his elaborate objection is that Munif has been incompetent in a formal sense. He deplores that in spite of living and getting a higher education in Europe, the novelist is "insufficiently Westernized to produce a narrative that feels much like what we call a novel" (1991, p. 563). His proprietary use of the word 'we' invokes once again all the bogeymen of progress narratives and authenticity, thus making Munif a novice, an undiscerning outsider who is just at the margins of the central narrative of novel's evolution.

Updike marks this foreigner's inadequacy in two ways: his failure of voice and failure of characterization. Because of Munif's alleged botching of character, Updike views the novel as not working properly:

> . . . no single figure acquires enough reality to attract our sympathetic interest . . . There is none of that sense of individual moral adventure . . . which, since *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle; *Cities of Salt* is concerned, instead, with men in the aggregate. (1991, pp. 563–564)

He finds "Munif's Muslims . . . familiar" comparing them with the "noble caftaned savages admired by T. E. Lawrence" (1991, p. 563). He makes use of derogatory language as a signature of retarded modernity and refers to the oil novel as a product of and protest against the modernity imported through imperialism. He bristles at the novel's "single insistent sociological point," namely that "the Arabs are discomfited, distressed, and deranged by the presence of Americans in their midst" (1991, p. 563). It seems ironical that Updike should treat the same sociological point in his most recent novel *Terrorist* within the New Jersey milieu.

In "Updike's Other America," Robert Stone's review of John Updike's novel *Terrorist*, Stone criticizes "Americanization" as an exported form of imperial modernity. This is a theme which uncannily resonates with Munif's narrative. Stone's comment on Americanization is particularly poignant:

> In dystopic usage the suggestion was of quick greenbacks primitively acquired by new money, the ruthless subjection of the land and the aboriginal people, and all the confusion and suffering and mess wrought by mines, railroads and factories. The term invokes the transformation of the landscape into unnatural mechanical shapes . . . Most threateningly for many, 'Americanization' also meant a setting aside of the social order in ruthless pursuit of profit, a jury-rigged class system based on money, a rootless and dislocated population. (2006)

To move beyond the bankruptcy of postmodern culture, Fredric Jameson in his preface to the *Cultures of Globalization* famously challenges cultural producers to

construct new cognitive maps that help illustrate how everyday life everywhere is structured and enabled by a globalizing capitalist modernity. As Jameson emphasizes, what is at stake in contemporary cultural production and canonization is how globalization is understood and narrated (xi–xvi). In postwar America, John Updike was central to the construction, maintenance and policing of high culture's borders. Most of the reading public turned to his reviews. His reviews deemed if a new cultural work was worthy to be placed into high culture's vaulted canon. And he proclaimed that Munif's *Cities of Salt* was not a novel. Hence, his aesthetic/ideological borders distinguishing what is and what is not a novel prove to be part of a larger discourse of the United States' exceptionalism. Whereas by recognizing modernity as petromodernity, culture proves not to be bankrupt. Instead, it becomes an important means to map the violences that constitute global capitalism, and a means to better understand the social relations that enable the American empire and the everyday lives of American subjects.

To conclude, the limited First World review of the selected Third World Arabic novel exhibits a very typical self/other Western approach towards the East. And one of the purposes of this study is to expose how unified the globe has become because of the incompatible strife between capital and labour. Because of this struggle, there is an ever-increasing number of texts which cannot be precisely described as belonging to this world or that. These texts are indicative of disruptions in unilinear teleological narratives, flows, courses and directions. These disturbances intrude upon the discursive space of the traditional Western novel, and the context from which such disruptions arise cannot be simply described as lying 'outside' the context of the Western novel. *Cities of Salt* is an example of such texts.

Material and Methods

The research is interpretative and qualitative in nature making a deconstructive study of a transnational third world narrative as a postmodern allegory. The method of textual analysis has been employed to explore how such discourse as can transcend the limits of the national proves constructive among various histories of persecution by unlocking productive and innovative possibilities for becoming. A close reading of the text helps interpreting transnational discourse as capable of initiating new openings for articulation, and remapping the violent pasts as well as diaspora into alternative positionalities. The primary exploration made by this interpretative study is the revelation of a new type of postcolonial literature which can foreground the ever-present multiplicity denied by the colonial space. Such biopolitical literature is capable of producing a new form of writing which is simultaneously literary and political because it shatters the very core of imperial fabric and its postcolonial residues.

Results and Discussion

The premise upon which this article is based is that Abdel Rahman Munif, the Saudi-Jordanian novelist, taken as a representative of the third world literature, makes use of allegory as a tool of expression and criticism in the first volume of his petro-quintet *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989). Munif was an exile banished from Saudi Arabia due to the regime's strict policies of censorship with regard to the freedom of expression. Still his faith in writing as a powerful instrument for change never faltered. To assault both the Persian Gulf bourgeois elite and their alien collaborators, he appropriated a multigenric tool. The Six Day Arab-Israel War played a major role in propelling him to channel his political energies into a literary direction. In an interview to Banipal, he recalled how "The defeat of 1967 pushed me toward the novel not as a means of escape but of confrontation. It had an unforgettable effect: to see such a vast area as the Arab world—

with all its enormous clamour and slogans—crumble and fall, not just in six days but a mere few hours" (as cited in Hafez, 2006, p. 47).

Munif belonged to a generation which was heartened by the post-World War II decolonization, stimulated by nationalism and socialism, and laden "with an immense load of dreams and desires for change . . . But our dreams were greater than our resources" (Habash, 2003, p. 3). After the possibilities of organized resistance had waned away, Munif became a writer-activist. He chose literature as an alternative resource. Within the precarious situation of exile, he acquired for himself some element of independence and purposeful hope in the diverted realm of literature. Literature became a space of displaced possibility for an unsettled man.

Munif responded to the ongoing region-wide crises through writing either allegorical fables saturated in oral tradition or historical epics mingled with semi-allegorical ingredients. Such allegorical tendency performed a twofold function. On one hand, it granted him a political deniability. On the other hand, in a more significant manner, it labeled him as a resolute regional writer in a transnational sense, unlike a Thomas Hardy. Munif believed that the striking commonalities of his region were politically more consequential than its inner differences. For him, the Arab region from the Atlantic to the Gulf was one extensive carcenal state, and he envisioned a world without maps. Once in another regionalist remark, Munif said, "the Bedouin oil blessing, which at one time was confined to the desert, has moved to all Arab cities and become the force defining not only politics but culture, ways of life, and the human concerns in this region" (Habash, 2003, p. 4). Such comments indicate a dual imaginative obsession on Munif's part: on the one hand imprisonment and on the other hand movement. Movement for Munif meant exile, banishment and upheaval. Involuntary mobility and immobility bedeviling the Arab region is a recurrent theme in his narratives.

Munif very rarely named the societies in which his novels are set, even though it could be easily recognizable, for instance the name Saudi Arabia is never mentioned explicitly in his *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989). By not particularizing the sites of his narratives, Munif wanted to delimit the likelihood of his critique being read as specific to a nation, because this could exculpate the other regimes which are equally hideous in the region, as he once explained:

If, for example, we discuss the political prison in a confined territory such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia, it seems as if we are exonerating other places or as if political prisons do not exist in these places, especially when we know they exist from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Thus I consider the generalization of this subject is the ultimate specificity. (Habash, 2003, p. 3)

Hence, the use of such inverse specificity makes Munif's fiction desirably more effective. He at once amasses historical, cultural, geographical and sensory details to write against forces of censorship, repression and amnesia. The impression of whole societies is created, but these societies are never reducible to themselves. Munif's inclusive regionalism is emphasized by his persistent dedication to a transnational justice of environmental and cultural dimensions. These are persuasively set up through allegorical counterpoints between petroculture's back room intriguings and resource extravagance, and the regenerative, modest and limpid life of the grove.

Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989) is a politico-historical allegory in the sense that the setting is an unnamed Persian Gulf Kingdom in the 1930s. Even though the setting and characters are fictional, the narrative is evidently a reconstruction of the events

which took place during the early oil exploration years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the physical and psychological effects of such economic and political intervention on the lives of the indigenous population. It is noteworthy how Munif incorporates historical and political realities into his petrofiction. Before the discovery of oil, for numerous millennia, the basis of Saudi Arabia's economy had been chiefly agricultural and pastoral activities near the wells and oases of the Arabian Peninsula. The indigenous population was divided between nomadic and settled lifestyle. The settled communities maintained their subsistence level through cultivating, shepherding and trading with the caravans of the nomads who came at regular intervals to their settlements. In 1932, after the establishment of al-Saud monarchy and the expansion of the Saudi Arabian kingdom, drastic changes occurred in the agricultural and pastoral lives of the Arabia's population.

While geologically and politically the realm of the oil is opaque, subterranean and rife with confidential allowances and behind-the-scene imperial deals, the grove realm—whether be it date or olive—is the realm of provenance and provender. Long before the American philosopher-environmentalist Aldo Leopold's enunciation of 'Environmental Ethics', Munif had become intuitively aware of the effect of the uprooted grove on ecological system. With Munif, trees become tangible markers of resistant memory, exemplary carriers of cultural dignity and sustainable life, and stakeholders of bioregions and history. His unusually uprooted life and feeling of its rendings, and deep-rooted nostalgia intensify his fondness for humanization of his region's trees and arborealization of its people. In the first volume of *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989), a fictional form is given to the historical events spanning from the first 1933 American Oil Company concession in the Persian Gulf to the completion of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline in 1950 and the revolting strikes of workers in Dhahran (Munif's fictional Harran) in 1953.

Despite containing the elegiac mournings for a lost world, *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989) is not just a threnody for tradition. Munif's approach towards modernity had always been ambivalent. He was not a foe of modernity or mineral wealth as such. His battle was against the cruelly perverted form of modernization in the Arabian Peninsula. This antagonism supplied the content and form of his quintet. A tribal saga is in the foreground of the narrative—the feuds between the tribes of Arabia, the victory of one particular tribe over all others by means of appropriation of religious dogma, violence, betrayal and the security of foreign backing, and the continuation of those feuds within the victorious tribe even after the achievement of complete sovereignty. In the whole Arab world, Saudi Arabia is the only country named after a family. Munif deconstructs the historical lies upon which the legitimacy of this dynasty has been based. Then he etches a portrait not only of its hypocrisy, savagery and treachery, but also of its constant subservience to imperial overlords and wreckings of any advances towards political or economic independence in the Arab world. Since the beginning, the House of Saud can be discerned as reliant upon imperial suzerainty of first Britain and then the United States. Hence at the back of tribal saga stand the empires of oil and their part in frustrating all prospects of progress in the region.

Writing about the floating world of oil can be difficult because of its ever-changing, ever-shifting quality: in multiple ways it has the tendency to make fiction trip into ambiguity. First of all, no specific form has yet been invented to grant a well-deserved literary expression to the historical 'Oil Encounter'. Novel as a genre is most comfortable in monolingual speech communities or nation states; whereas oil-related experiences are lived out within such a space as is no place at all. This is an intrinsically heterogeneous, international and displaced world. Such world radically challenges not only the practice of writing but also most of the postmodern culture. Ideas such as that

of civilizations as distant and distinguishable, and of societies as separate and identifiable are rejected by this world of oil. Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989), which deals with the history of oil, is an attempt to represent this world in fiction. Within the context of literature-energy relationship, Peter Theroux, the American who translated Munif's narrative into English, is of the view that oil was used by Munif as a plot mechanism (1988). With its help he constructed a Balzacian vista and projected it into a civilization which had not been previously represented in any postmodern literature. Neither Munif nor his translator ever thought that Munif would be the man through whom the 'Oil Encounter' between the Occident and the Orient would be woven into the Arab and world literature. This significant event took place not in Cairo or Beirut, the metropolises of the Arab world of literature, but through a hybrid Saudi-Iraqi rustic whose life was filled with oil and politics. Munif was a die-hard adversary of despotism and monarchy in a particular era and locus where tyrants usurped the greatest part of the Middle East's oil wealth. He once told Theroux, "Oil is our one and only chance to build a future, and the regimes are ruining it" (as cited in Theroux, 1988). From a writer's standpoint, Munif made use of hydrocarbon to recount the tale of American-Arabian social encounter. As a political thinker, he was maddened by the thought that oil wealth was being used not to develop and modernize the Arabian society but to enthrone and perpetuate backward monarchies which supported primitive religious establishments and the West. As an oil economist, Munif viewed oil as the sole possibility for the Arabs to construct a future independent of the West instead of being dependent on them. That is why the oil men and their collaborators are always portrayed spitefully in Munif's novels.

Munif's tale flirts with the supernatural, the comical and the natural history. The dwellers of an Arcadian oasis are told that some strangers, the *ifranj*, are roaming over the wilderness. These Franks profess to be in quest of water which seems to be a portentous fib because none can surpass the native Arabs in spotting signs of this Adam's ale. Soon encampments of these foreigners can be sighted. They also get up at daybreak like the inhabitants of the Wadi, but instead of offering morning prayers, they perform certain activities in succession which appear as demonic rituals to the unsettled watchers. What follows is an action-packed confrontation between the indignant inhabitants and their nescient emir. Nothing gets settled, yet the meeting sketches an extremely thrilling scene in which tribal politics can be seen in full action. Ultimately it is through the Bedouin' eyes that the reader is made to feel going through something very much like science fiction. The natives can interpret this phenomenon only as something apocalyptic. There appear unbelievable metallic machines on the scene and the oasis is bulldozed and transformed into an oil field. Wadi al-Uyoun is no more: the Wadi which quickened the pace of caravans for centuries to reach its good water and sweet, relaxing breezes. The Wadi's inhabitants are cruelly dislocated from their centuries' old habitat. They are quickly carried away by passing camel caravans. A number of them set out for a coastal settlement called Harran (the *Overheated*), where the new oil installations are to be built, a cluster of low mud houses, a place very much like Doha and Kuwait of a few decades ago. Then the novel suddenly expands like a river merging with the sea. The story becomes one of globalization; countless people are made to travel centuries in a few brief, chaotic years, not even in economy class but in the cargo hold of modern capitalism. In its wake, petro-capitalism brings Arab diaspora, destitution, waged menial labour, idea of real estate, fabulous miscellany of Machiavellianism and eventual tragedy. Two new townships are conjured into being: American Harran and Arab Harran. The difference between the two is highlighted in the following lines. Every evening after the day's work is done, the men drift towards their lodgings:

. . . to the two sectors like streams coursing down a slope, one broad and one small, the Americans to their camp and the Arabs to theirs, the Americans to their swimming pool, where their racket could be heard in the nearby barracks behind the barbed wire. When silence fell the workers guessed the Americans had gone into their air-conditioned rooms whose thick curtains shut everything out: sunlight, dust, flies, and Arabs. (Munif, 1989, p. 391)

'Oil' flows invisibly through every page of the narrative. When the confused emir claims to the local men that all of them would come to be affluent through either gold or oil or both, they are bewildered and only want to know whether the scary strangers will remain among them or go back, "'Oil? The naphtha we find is enough to light these lamps of ours that choke you with fumes before they shed light'"(Munif, 1989, p. 95). Gradually and problematically, instead of just shedding light, oil brings disaster for them. The oasis is leveled and the 'Encounter' begins with its distorted modernity and corruption, material wealth, losses and disruptions. Beyond the events of the novel, in the endmost spin of the gyre of history, there is the author who ultimately found himself a deportee. Munif was not exiled by a petroleum corporation; rather it was the doing of a regime which held its sway through oil. Munif never wrote to please and his narrative is not a localized Arabian tale but a global one. *Cities of Salt* (1984/1989) was written in Paris, and Munif kept on wandering and explaining his perspective and vision throughout the world, never returning to his homeland, never draping himself in any country's flag. That was the cost of oil which he had to pay.

Munif combines both a utopia and a dystopia in his narrative as metaphors in an effort to explore the different directions humanity can take, depending upon its choices and ending up with one of the two possible futures. In order to expose the social and political structures of oil regimes, Munif first creates a utopia and then out of its destruction produces a dystopia. The utopia of Wadi al-Uyoun is in complete harmony with the novelist's ethos, and its various nostalgic attributes are intended to appeal to the readers. Whereas the city of Harran as a dystopia constructed through oil is in complete disagreement with his ethos. All the characteristics of a typical dystopia—mass poverty, public suspicion and mistrust, oppression and carcenal state—are present in Munif's fictional city of Harran.

In the structure of the narrative, how Munif turns the oasis utopia into an oil dystopia is very significant. Within the oasis scenario, the initial confrontations of an imperial resource war and the omens of a resource curse begin. Water and the trees dependent upon it had been the core of blessing and the foundation of bounty in the utopian oasis community for centuries. It is water which connects past to future, time to space, space to movement, cultivation to nomadism, and ultimately sustains tradition. Amiri Baraka called it "the changing same" because water underlies a culture of continuity within flux responsive to ecological vicissitudes, a culture infused with cosmological belonging and steeped in a history of nomadic cosmopolitanism (Baraka, 1968, p. 11). This water-based culture is uprooted by the oil men and supplanted with a petroleum-fixated culture. Hence, a consequential shift occurs in resource priorities and brings a radical temporal rupture with it. In this transmutation, an oasis deep sense of time which is indivisibly ecological and cultural is made subordinate to petroculture's boastfully deeper sense of time which is based on a seemingly infinite geological liberality fueling an ostensibly infinite future affluence. The intruders own a hubris which scorns the notion of limits. The key time frame shifts from cyclic, seasonally renewable culture which prizes water time to a culture controlled by the linear narrative of oil time. Such narrative of oil time is linear because in it the concerns with regard to sustainability are crushed through the onrush of an ideology of development which is

allegedly universal in its magnanimity, as is exhibited in the Americans' declaration when they arrive there that all the people of the Wadi would be among the richest and happiest of all mankind (Munif, 1989, p. 85). Hence, Munif successfully conveys the conversion of a utopia into a dystopia, and the cosmopolitan intricacy of oasis culture before its disruption through an instrumental rationality which focused only on relic people and fossil fuels, and which removed and forcibly remade the impedimentary Bedouin in the name of profit, modernity and civilization.

Conclusion

The novel ends on an optimistic note. There is a dramatic confrontation between the old Harran and the new: between a world where the emir used to sit in coffee-houses and gossip with the Bedouin, where everybody had time for everyone else and no one was ever so ill that they needed remedies that were sold for money, and a universe in which Mr. Middleton of the oil company holds their livelihoods in his hands, where the newly arrived Lebanese doctor Subhi al-Mahmilji, "physician and surgeon, specialist in internal and venereal diseases, Universities of Berlin and Vienna" (Munif, 1989, p. 531), charges huge fees for the smallest of services, where the emir spies on the townspeople with a telescope and needs a cadre of secret police to tell him what they are thinking. A series of events make this matter come to a head. The workers of Harran are prompted to strike, and the book ends with an unequivocal triumph for the workers.

The ending Munif chooses for his narrative is founded in pure wish-fulfilment. It has probably more to do with his own history than the story of oil in the Gulf. No one knew better than Munif that the last occurrence in his narrative is just a wishful reverie of an escapist. He must be aware of the fact that within the Arabian Peninsula the work forces of the multinational petroleum companies have never been active in a political sense. A careful strategy for keeping the workers quiescent is followed: the Arab component of the work forces is held at a strictly regulated numerical level, while large numbers of migrants from the poorer countries of Asia are imported. This policy has been magically effective in the short run. It has given birth to a particular type of working-class which is politically passive because of its isolation from the indigenous society and from one another because of language and culture barriers, and because of living perpetually under the threat of deportation. Within the Arab-speaking world, a predominantly Arab work force could not be kept so ineffective. The present class of workers is, in fact, a class of helots with virtually no rights at all. Their experiences are a mockery of the human rights rhetoric that accompanied the Gulf War. The fact that the war has effected no changes in the labour policies of the sheikhdoms is a proof that under the shield of newly designed world order the privileges of specific people are guarded at the cost of others. Thus Mnuif's story is devastatingly painful because he could discern that in the oil sheikhdoms, the workplace, commonly known as the birthplace of democracy, had become the founding site of the present-day despotism. Yet his insistent belief in the power of writing as a tool for change made him give a heart-warming ending to his novel, thus combining the personal with the political at the site of allegory as a compensation for the social transformations he had dreamt of.

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